

Childish behavior (1 Thessalonians 2:1-8)

Does Paul say "we were gentle among you"? Or "we were infants"?

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

A few months ago, the evening news was playing in the background as our family was getting organized for supper. I overheard the anchor ask, "Who is the most powerful preacher in Charlotte? Is it . . . ?" and he named four relatively prominent clergy. "Call in and vote! Or e-mail us! And we'll tell you tomorrow night who really is the most powerful preacher!" After we stopped laughing, I thought, "How southern. I bet this doesn't go on in Vermont or Europe." The next night, falling for the gambit, I tuned in and saw the friend who had "won." He was reflecting on what it's like to be so powerful.

Could any adjective describing the clergy or the church be more inaccurate than *powerful*? We can't get our own volunteers to show up on time, much less make some sweeping impact on a big city. Which exact muscles should we be flexing? In today's world, we are not powerful; we are—what might the best adjective be?—*Lilliputian*? *impotent*? *scrawny*? How do we live in a culture that rushes by the church and either yawns with boredom or wrinkles its eyebrows with cynicism? Is there any clue in an obscure text like 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8?

I rarely pay attention to textual variants when studying a passage. Once in a great while, I pretend I am a young intellectual back in seminary and retrieve words like *Sinaiticus* or *Alexandrinus* or *Bodmer papyrus* out of the cobwebs of my brain, but usually I skim past them. Since I am writing here for a few who attend to such details, I plunged into the text of verse 7 and discovered a spiritually intriguing decision that translators must make.

In my old RSV, Paul says, "We were gentle among you." Abraham Malherbe's commentary claims that *epioi* or *gentle* is the superior reading. The alternative is *infants*, *nepioi*, or *epioi* with an "n" stuck on the front, which appears in Bodmer, Vaticanus and Jerome. Sinaiticus at first read *nepioi*, but somebody corrected it to

epioi. Did a scribe drifting off to sleep jiggle the stylus to add the “n” inadvertently? Was this a little joke from a copyist who’d just become an uncle? Could *infants* be right?

In heaven we can ask Paul himself, but in the meantime I’m rooting for *nepioi*, *infants*. *Gentle* does not fit the prickly, irascible Paul very well, although in one of his fits of braggadocio he might have fudged a little. Paul was more infantlike, and I don’t mean that in any warm, fuzzy way. Martin Luther spoke the truth when in 1538 he looked at his family of six children, ages four to 12, and remarked, “Christ said we must become as little children to enter the kingdom. Dear God, this is too much. Must we become such idiots?” I seem to remember incessant screaming at ungodly hours, being thrown up upon, never getting anything done and staggering wearily through the day with a soiled spot on the shoulder of my jacket.

Thinking about infants, I see a thicket of analogies between their mode of being and the way Paul invaded a city like Thessalonica: demanding, wanting a response *now*, being the center of attention, brooking no rivals. Paul had no desire to please people; he spoke boldly, frankly. Infants may elicit gentleness from others, but they are not themselves very gentle. Gentleness, even gentility, is cultivated over time. When we grow up, we learn how to stop acting like infants: Don’t be demanding, don’t cry out loud, don’t wake anyone up. We are tutored in how to be pleasing, and pleasantness has its rewards in the life of the church. But we run the risk of turning out like that chaplain whom teenaged Thomas Merton heard preaching on 1 Corinthians 13: “His exegesis was a bit strange. . . . Charity meant good sportsmanship, cricket, the decent thing, wearing the right clothes, using the proper spoon, not being a cad. . . . I think Peter and the Apostles would have been rather surprised at the concept that Christ had been scourged and beaten by soldiers, cursed and crowned with thorns and subjected to unutterable contempt and finally nailed to the cross and left to bleed to death in order that we might all become gentlemen.”

Clergy and laity are taught to be professional, to pursue excellence, and surely God is embarrassed by Christians who wear ridiculous clothes and act like cads. But how do we flee the devil’s snare? How do we avoid being lured into a veneer of respectability that neuters the gospel we were ordained to bear awkwardly and pointedly? Is our vocation always to be gentle, which comes off as being saccharine or vapid? Or to be more infantlike, raising a voice, demanding some reply, shedding tears right out in the open, following Jesus into unpleasant, dirty places, risking the

evaluation that we are idiots?

Never forgetting Paul's total lack of modesty, we set out to live differently. John Chrysostom instructed his congregation on how to win over unbelievers: "Let us astound them by our way of life. This is the unanswerable argument. Though we give 10,000 precepts in words, if we do not exhibit a far better life, we gain nothing. It is not what is said that draws their attention, but what we do. Let us win them therefore by our life." You'll miss a few parties; you won't get invited certain places. Most adults on the prowl for a quiet evening prefer peace and quiet and therefore will not get near the baby. It's OK. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the wise wizard Gandalf tells the hobbits, "Let folly be our cloak." Folly worked pretty well for Jesus, Paul, St. Francis and a holy host of others . . . or we might say it didn't "work well," but was faithful and strangely powerful in an infant, toddling kind of way.